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ABSTRACT

Literature's intellectual and spiritual independence and great public appeal afford it great potential as a moving force in today's increasingly secular, unphilosophical, and nonliterary world, which nonetheless longs for harmony, unity of purpose, and spiritual oneness. Although political oppression and literary commercialism threaten literature and the writer today, the writer is challenged to reestablish, in combination with enlightened philosophical, scientific, and religious inquiry, the supremacy of humanity and humaneness in interpersonal and international affairs. Literature's unique traits render it singularly capable of reasserting itself as a moral and intellectual force in our time. (DF)

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AN AGE LONGING FOR UNITY:

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ROLE OF MODERN LITERATURE IN OUR TIME.

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Carl Steiner

Introduction (Abstract).

This is not a paper on literature alone, nor on philosophy in literature per se. Its aim is to show the interaction between literature and philosophy in our troubled age and to define the possible role that literature could play in it. Much has been said and written on the topic of philosophy in literature, and little would be gained in re-iterating or summarizing past findings in the short space (time) alloted me. The scope of this paper, both diachronic and synchronic as well as critical, argumentative, and speculative in method, is to point out the common origins of literature and philosophy as well as their early, never fully shed connection with religion. Literature, however, is not thought to be the handmaiden of either. Over the ages it has clearly demonstrated its intellectual and spiritual independence and its much broader public appeal. These unique traits make it singularly capable of re-asserting itself as a moral and intellectual force in our time, which, I regret to say, has prostrated itself thoughtlessly before the modern gods of scientific and technological progress to the detriment of man's own humanity and his possible destiny as a redeemer and liberator.

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Main Paper.

Some years ago the French writer and philosopher Jean Paul Sartre raised the question about the essence and scope of literature and its practitioner, the writer, in modern times in a controversial book, titled Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (What Is Literature?). In this argumentative volume, written two years after the end of the second world war, Sartre postulates a littérature engagée, a literature in fact that aims to overcome the separation between itself and society through action. A concomitant task of this type of writing, as Sartre sees it, is the overcoming of the failure of the modern writer in the utilitarian, bourgeois society, against which he rebels. In an inversion of Taine's milieu theory, Sartre does not view the environment as the determining factor here, but rather the appeal of the reader to the freedom of the writer to write directly for his own age, which in fact puts the latter into the necessary dialectical and creative relationship with the former. Literature thus becomes "the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution." The basis of the engagement of this literature is the notion that writing is action, realization.

Much more skeptical and less dogmatic regarding the necessity of a new role for literature in our age is Sartre's largely autobiographical essay Les Mots (The Words), written in 1964. Here, going back to his own childhood and the roots of his own experiences as a developing writer, he comes to the rather pessimistic conclusion: "For a long time I considered my pen to be a sword: Now I recognize our powerlessness."

Being aware of the fact that Sartre's observations are not isolated, but reflect a trend, we might ask ourselves as to what has gone wrong with the writer's vision of himself and his role in modern society. If the modern writer, even the "engaged" one--that is, the politically and socially aware and committed practitioner of the art of writing--, is powerless and, what is worse, becomes paralyzed in his endeavor to bring about improvement in the human condition, who does hold

the key to man's intellectual destiny today? Surely, it could not be the politician, nor even the political system. Sartre's attempted clarifications of the role of literature and the writer in society point to the apparent decline of both, to the shrinking, if you will, of the stature of either in our modern age, a downward development, to be sure, that has been long in the making. But is the decline of literature's role in the modern world, the frustration, so to speak, of the pen by the sword, an isolated social and intellectual phenomenon?

The answer to this query must be a resounding no. Literature's debacle is not alone. Its downfall from once lofty heights has been accompanied by the equally radical slippage of religion and philosophy in the so-called advancing civilizations. The eclipse of religion has been most aptly noted and predicted, if not explained, in Nietzsche's much quoted statement: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed Him!" Modern philosophy largely lacks innovation. It has become particular, descriptive, historical, and critical rather than striking out in new enobling and unifying directions. This general lack of universality affects, in my opinion, all modern philosophical trends and schools from existentialism to logical positivism. The last truly universalist philosopher was Hegel. His death in 1831 and that of Goethe in 1832, proclaimed by Heine with the words: "The Gods are dead," meant also the demise of universalism in speculative human thought. There was no longer a visible, believable, unifying, all-encompassing entity or system. Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche became largely critics and particularists. The same can be said of our most renowned twentieth century philosophers such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Wittgenstein. The latter points out a new dilemma in modern thought: the questionable efficacy of language. Communication, in spite of forever increasing technical means and refinements, threatens to break down. The more we say, the less we understand one another. The medium becomes the message. Meaning begins to escape us. We hear more, but we really know less. The end is not yet in sight.

The question presents itself: Who will deliver us from these feelings of inadequacy, from these new evils that our progressively more and more pessimistic age has brought about, now that the philosophers, the priests, and the writers of old standing have by and large been disowned and disinherited as guardians of man's moral and ethical needs, have been dismissed, so to speak, as guarantors of man's spiritual and intellectual heritage? Has the scientist perhaps become the arbiter and the proverbial wise man of our time? Has science and technology been called upon to fill the menacing spiritual vacuum, to replace the threatening intellectual void and to save us from ourselves?

We may define science as man's endeavor to come to (1) comprehend and (2) manipulate his outer and inner environment--that is, the world at large or nature and all that comprizes it as well as his own biological, social, and psychological make-up and structure--by avowed rational means, subject to dispassionate, repeatable verification. Two features again strike us with regard to man's scientific striving: (1) its spectacular and rapid rise in human affairs, and (2) its rather negligible impact on man's moral behavior. As regards the former, the nearly complete pervasiveness of science and its factual omnipresence in everything we do point to it as the religion of modern man. As such it has almost all the trappings of traditional religions: the faith of its practitioners and followers in its own infallibility, a self-perpetuating mode of being, its own holy men, monuments and temples of worship, and even the promise of possible future immortality or, even better, eternal youth as its ultimate goal. What it seems to lack, however, altogether is a code of ethics, a moral code, if you will. It has given us simultaneously the tools to save and create as well as to annihilate and destroy not merely ourselves, but our environment and everything that comprizes it as well. There were and are, to be sure, many individual attempts on the part of scientists to act in a highly ethical manner to the point even of self-sacrifice. But these attempts, praiseworthy as they are, cannot be said

to be the result of any universally accepted scientific ethical code. They are basically the moral acts of individuals, having come about as the result of a value system of a different source, usually religious or philosophical in origin. If there is no scientific moral code, there is nevertheless a basic scientific ethic, if not obsession: the drive to find and to know the truth about everything and all.

But here, it seems, we have discovered the horns of the dilemma. Knowing, what makes the universe tick, seeking universal truths, and finding out about universal laws are one thing, in and of itself not ignoble in origin or intention but rather the opposite. Yet science in today's world is rarely if ever "true." There is an "applied" side to it. This applied part of science, considered by many to be its most beneficial aspect, is pragmatic or practical in nature, almost business-like. The "good" is here what does the most good for the greatest number at a given time in man's evolving and constantly changing consciousness. Here too, the modern theory of relativity seems to reign supreme. Hence the concept of what is "good" appears very fickle and short-lived and changes as conditions and views change. DDT, for example, thought to be a nearly ultimate good in agriculture only a generation ago is considered to be a universal evil today since it has been found to poison the environment and hence the food chain, so that it is banned now or only rarely administered in most civilized societies. A similar development begins to become visible with regard to atomic energy. A further difficulty arises from the technological side, the technical aspect of modern science, in that the practical application of the search for knowledge and truth, namely technology in its manifold ramifications, is more and more thought of as an end in itself. That is to say, gadgets take the place of thoughts, mechanical gimmicks are substituted for ideals, and technical "progress," serving special commercial or political interests, is mistaken for true advancement in human insights into the superstructure of our universe.

What are we to do now? Where do we go from here? Some of the most renowned scientists of our age, it seems to me, have shown us the way. They have suggested a new awareness, both philosophical and humane in nature. The late German phycisist Werner Heisenberg, himself one of the giants of science in the twentieth century, refers to this point in his book Das Naturbild der heutigen Physik (The Depiction of Nature in Today's Physics):

> If we try, starting out from the situation in the modern natural sciences, to grope toward the fundaments, which have been set into motion, we gain the impression that we do not oversimplify the circumstances too much if we say that, for the first time in the course of history, man on this earth is only confronting himself, that he does not find any other partner or adversary.... In earlier epochs, man found himself confronted by nature. Indeed, nature, inhabited by living creatures of all sorts, was an empire with its own set of laws, into which man somehow had to fit himself as a living entity. In our time, however, we live in a world that has been so completely changed by man that--whether we deal with the apparatus of daily existence, whether we partake of food prepared by machines or walk through the landscape which we ourselves have changed--again and again, we meet up with the structures created by us, that, so to speak, we always meet only ourselves.

This meeting up with ourselves in nearly everything and all we do, of which Heisenberg speaks, points away from the technical world of unfeeling push-button machines and inflexible pre-programmed computers that we have invented purportedly for the sake of efficiency or, even more basically, as a convenience, surely not for our security. If we are not to lose control of ourselves and our destiny, we need to re-affirm our intellectual heritage. That means for all practical purposes: let us be mindful of our roots; let us, as a first step, go back to philosophy.

Historically speaking, we are accustomed to hearing philosophy described as the mother of all the sciences. If one traces the modern sciences back to their

common root ancestry in ancient Greece, this notion is indeed borne out. There, in this remarkable conglomeration, if not confederation, of early city states, thinkers of considerable talent, in seemingly endless competition with one another, pondered at the dawn of Western history and civilization for several generations over first causes and final effects as well as ultimate issues and queries dealing with the whole panoply of man's insatiable curiosity about himself and the world surrounding him. To put it at the same time more poetically and less poetically, these ancient ponderers were driven by a never-ceasing urge to explain the largely inexplicable in order to attain that inner glow, that longed-for feeling of personal achievement, comfort, and even security that seem to be the necessary by-products, if not psychological trigger mechanisms, of man's apparently endless quest for knowledge.

Granted that this is so, where does literature come into the picture? How does it fit into the just painted canvass? What is its place and function in this indisputable link, in this basic and seemingly ever-binding and bonding connection between philosophy, the modern sciences and us, who are self-evidently living in an all-pervasive scientific and not in a philosophical nor literary age?

It seems to me that there is also a bond between literature and philosophy that is more venerable, more ancient, indeed, even more fundamental than is the one previously described between philosophy and modern science. Although the term 'literature,' used in vernacular deviations in all Western languages, is etymologically younger than the equally universal nomenclature 'philosophy,' all evidence points to the common origin of both concepts in the myths and legends, the cult stories and heroic tales of our primitive ancestors. But here we also find the rudiments of religion. Truly, the beneficial intent of the early wise men, priests, prophets, bards, story tellers alike was to satisfy the basic human need to know in its dual meaning of being acquainted and comprehending the best one can, that is, to come to grips with observed natural and psychic phenomena in a rational or irrational manner and to learn in consequence to cope with them, to adjust accordingly, and ultimately to survive the challenges

by facing common unknowns, perceived as dangers, in a more amenable, structured setting. But there is a second element in this early unison of primitive philosophy, literature, and religion that may explain their phenomenal growth, success, and staying power in man's historic development. This other vital ingredient is our longing to be entertained through manipulation of our sensual and intellectual apparatus. In this area, religion and literature have from the very beginning outperformed philosophy, which evidently lacked the entertainment potential of the other two and could therefore never develop a truly broad and universal following. Religion attained popularity rather early through its public cult and ceremonies. Yet literature pleased man's sense of entertainment even more readily, satisfied his lust for joy and wonderment through the grandeur of language and sound, the forcefulness of gesture and mimicry, and the overpowering appeal to the human capacity for imagination and longing for illusion and the extraordinary. What wonder then that religion from the very outset has never been able to develop a pure cult or ceremony devoid of and divorced from a story or happening that must not somehow be voiced, uttered, eventually given also visual permanence through scripture.

Conversely, literature has also been more than the multilingual voicing or verbalizing of man's inherent drive to give vent to his inner fantasies and visions, be they spiritual, intellectual or sexual in nature, along artistic lines. Nor has it been just a self-fulfilling activity. Literature, even that of the proverbial l'art pour l'art bent or inclination, or that of the intellectual ivory tower, can be shown to have had both a vision, transcending the self, and a mission, reaching out to the whole of humanity. In either sense, it has had, at its best, an unmistakable religious flair and a messianic zeal, demonstrating now and then its close proximity to sacred scriptures and liturgical writing. It has, of course, also encompassed man's view of the mundane and his insatiable appetite for the profane. The latter perhaps readily explains its popularity among the

the masses, to whom, as has already been mentioned, it can appeal more readily, in contrast to philosophy, which aims intellectually at an elite. In this respect, literature also outperforms religion in popularity and can be said to take second place to it or to such modern pseudo-religions as fascism and communism only in an illiterate age or in a society that, for reasons of perpetuating an elite or a ruling minority, severely curtails free literary expression. Cases in point abound throughout human history. One is reminded of Louis' the Pious' destruction of collected heroic tales in the Dark Ages and of the inhumane Soviet repression of free literary thought in our own day. Seen from the point of view of totality and universality--these two unifiers, which are so sorely needed in our age--, literature can be said to be the verbalized and artistically shaped potential sum-total of human experience, past and present, with its antennae directed even toward the future, a not merely historic as well as contemporary, but at times also sybillic art form.

Yet great as its potential is as a moving force in today's world, the challenge that literature faces in our increasingly secular, un-philosophical and non-literary epoch is indeed stupendous. Basically, it must aim to re-assert itself at its highest level as a primary moral force in an intrinsically perhaps amoral, if not immoral, universe, a world that,in spite of everything and all, is nevertheless longing for harmony, unity of purpose and spiritual oneness. The German writer Wolfgang Borchert, who died shortly after the second world war at the age of twenty-six as one of its many victims, summarized the task of the modern writer very simply and touchingly:

> The writer must name the house, which we are all building. Likewise its various rooms. He must call the sick-room "the sad chamber," the attic "the drafty room" and the cellar "the dark one." He must not call the cellar "the beautiful room."
>
> If he cannot obtain a pencil, he must despair of pain. He must try

carving on the wall with the spoon handle. As in prison: This is an ugly hole. If he does not do that in his despair, he is not genuine. He should be sent to the street sweepers.

If they read his letters in other houses, they must know: Well, O.K. That is the way they are in that house. It matters little whether he writes in big or small letters. But he must write legibly. He may live in the attic in the house. From there he has the most fantastic views. Marvellous, that is beautiful and cruel. It is lonely up there. And it is extremely cold and extremely hot. ...

At night, the writer may look at the stars. But woe to him if he does not feel that his house is in danger. Then he must shout out loud till his lungs are bursting.

Indeed, the dangers and challenges confronting literature and the writer of today are manifold and formidable. The Dr. Goebbels of the yesteryears have given way to the faceless political machines and politbureaus of our day and--I fear--the possible tomorrows to come. The book-burnings and gas chambers of past decades have been replaced in many areas of our present world with the age-old tactics of censorship, intimidation, and exile, not to speak of the practice of assassination and of sending free-spirited and dissident writers to physical and spiritual prisons and even insane asylums. Let us, however, also not underestimate the dangers of literary commercialism, of the so-called literary market place with its insatiable hunger for best-sellers and people pleasers for profit. The pressures it creates for instant success lead in much too many instances to permanent failures in substance and scope. The shrill sounds of novelty, moreover, drown out in an intolerable way the still present voices of clarity, beauty, hope, and truth.

But monumental as the challenges seem to be, even greater are the possible rewards. If the meek are really to inherit the earth, the writers of good will and high calling must preserve it for them, individually and collectively. This is

perhaps literature's greatest task in our age, namely to re-establish in combination with enlightened modern philosophical and scientific inquiry as well as tolerant religiosity the supremacy of humanity and humaneness in human and interhuman, perhaps even universal affairs and to help banish--hopefully forever--the demons of hatred, divisiveness and war, the ogres of greed, selfishness and destructiveness, and the dragons of what has become the soulless and insensitive runaway technology and technocracy of the day. The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, called the "good European," himself a tragic victim of man's inhumanity to man in the twentieth century, summarized the feelings of his and still our present generation very movingly:

> We had to agree with Freud, when he saw in our culture, in our civilization, only a thin veneer, which can be penetrated any moment by the destructive primordial forces of the subconscious. We had to accustom ourselves gradually to live without a foundation under our feet, without law, without freedom, without security. ... And in spite of everything and all which every day trumpets into our ears, which I myself and countless fellow sufferers have experienced in degradations and trials, I cannot completely deny the faith of my youth that some day it will go upward again, in spite of everything and all. Even from the abyss of horrors, in which we grope around today with disturbed and broken souls, I look up again and again to those old constellations, which shone over my childhood, and comfort myself with the inherited trust that this relapse will some day only appear to be an interval in the eternal rhythm of the onward and upward.

This great eternal rhythm of the onward and upward in human affairs, of which our greatest thinkers and writers have told us throughout the ages, could be, if regained, perhaps the longed-for link, the desired bridge to our visionary and symbolic "Paradise Lost," to the "Golden Age," of which the sages and poets of old have spoken and sung. Our attempts to help attain and eventually realize this most timeless

and noble of all our myths and dreams: the regaining of our abandoned intellectual and spiritual state of innocence and hope and ultimately of our lost faith in ourselves and our destiny, could lead, no doubt, to modern man's greatest achievements.

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